



A Tribute to Bishop John Shelby Spong by Rev. Dr. Matthew Fox

We are filled with gratitude to Bishop Spong for his courageous stands on issues of justice including gay and lesbian peoples and much more, and his efforts to save Christianity from itself. And we are in his debt for his critically acclaimed writings that teach us to grow up as people, as a believing people and as a Biblical people. His writings and courage and Biblical insights will continue to inspire many for generations to come. Also, his model of leadership that is not afraid to speak out and to lead and to absorb the knocks that come with critical thinking and leadership uplifts us all.

I am happy to share a letter Bishop Spong wrote me in the year 2000 on the occasion of my 60th birthday.

~ Rev. Dr. Matthew Fox



Rev. Dr. Matthew Fox holds a doctorate in spirituality from the Institut Catholique de Paris and has authored 35 books on spirituality and contemporary culture that have been translated into 74 languages. Fox has devoted 45 years to developing and teaching the tradition of Creation Spirituality and in doing so has reinvented forms of education and worship (called The Cosmic Mass). His work is inclusive of today's science and world spiritual traditions and has awakened millions to the much neglected earth-based mystical tradition of the West. He has helped to rediscover Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, Thomas Aquinas. Among his books are *A Way To God: Thomas Merton's Creation Spirituality Journey*; *Meister Eckhart: A Mystic-Warrior For Our Times*; *Hildegard of Bingen: A Saint for Our Times*; *Stations of the Cosmic Christ*;

Order of the Sacred Earth; *The Tao of Thomas Aquinas: Fierce Wisdom for Hard Times*; and *Julian of Norwich: Wisdom in a Time of Pandemic – And Beyond*. To encourage a passionate response to the news of climate change advancing so rapidly, Fox started *Daily Meditations with Matthew Fox*

Dear Matt,

It is a privilege to salute you on your 6th birthday and to be able to use this occasion to express my gratitude for all that you have meant to 20th century Christianity. Your book, *Original Blessing*, was the work that first brought you to my attention . It was in many ways a breathtaking book because it challenged the core of the primary interpretative Christian myth that proclaimed the basic fallen sinfulness of human life. That myth had been used historically primarily to enhance the power of the institutional church and its ordained hierarchy. In the service of that myth the church was destined to become first and foremost the dispenser of guilt. Someone has observed that the church “does guilt” more successfully than it does anything else, and guilt is, as one person noted, “the gift that keeps on giving.”

To convince people of their unworthiness is step one in creating a controlling mentality, especially when the church claims to be the only dispenser of forgiveness. It was also this definition of human life as flawed and hopeless that inspired the interpretation of the Christ as the Divine Rescuer. This, in turn, caused Christians to view the cross as a human sacrifice which would be pleasing to God who required a blood offering in order to restore the fallen world. It was and is a strange way to tell the story of the love of God found in Jesus Christ, but for centuries we Christians seemed to know no others. Finally, and in no small measure because of your work, we awakened to the reality that this way of proclaiming Christ presents us with a God more grotesque than worship worthy.

Once this ancient myth was broken open in your book, *Original Blessing*, you then were able to develop your vision of the Cosmic Christ. That, in turn, led you to place your emphasis on human wholeness instead of encouraging that passive, dependent immature kind of Christianity that the church traditionally seems to encourage. This vision of wholeness in turn opened you to seeing holiness in all that God had made. So your love for God’s creation, our mother earth, led you into being a theological environmentalist. Your discovery of holiness stretched on to include women whom the church had dismissed and gay and lesbian people whom the church had rejected. In each area you were a voice for something new, pointing the Christian Church to something it has never been but must surely become.

It is easy to see why you frightened the guardians of traditional orthodoxy. It is also easy to see that you were and are calling the Christian Church beyond the limits of antiquity, beyond its denominational structures in being the voice of a new creation. As one who shared with you a vision of this new Christianity, I have been pleased to learn from you, to walk beside you and to be your colleague in helping to usher in this new day for the Christian church.

Prophets who see the future and who embrace it in their lives as living signs of that new truth are never appreciated by the leaders of those institutions which the prophet’s words inevitably challenge. In their desire to cling to the past they have attacked you. It is fascinating to note that as they sought to exclude you, they were also sounding their own death knell. That is the way it always is when institutions become closed to new truth. But a generation from now, Matthew, people will look back at you and your work and give thanks that one like you lived in this critical moment and helped the Christian Church give birth to new possibilities. Being an ecclesiastical midwife is quite a vocation. I salute you with affection and appreciation.

Jack
The Right Reverend John S. Spong
Bishop of Newark
The Episcopal Church